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1908

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HOW TO OBTAIN

HEALTHY HOUSES.

Municipal, Co-operative, Tenant Co-operators, Garden Cities, Private Enterprise.

By Councillor JAMES JOHNSTON, J.P., C.E.

Manchester:
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1908.

HOW TO OBTAIN HEALTHY HOUSES.

The question of housing is one of primary importance to all classes of society, for if the house in which we live is not capable of providing us with efficient shelter, ample breathing space, pure air, and sunlight, our physical development is hindered, and our intellectual and moral growth is also retarded.

First in importance to enable us to obtain a healthy house are the building bye-laws of the local authority under which we live.

These bye-laws are framed under powers granted in the Public Health Act of 1875, and the amendment of that Act in 1890. Also in the case of large corporations, special local Acts, which they obtain from time to time (for instance, Manchester Improvement Act of 1865, Water Works and Improvement Act of 1869, and Manchester Order confirmed by the Local Government Board's Provisional Orders Confirmation Act, 1889), give special powers to deal with matters connected with housing and the laying out of streets. Thus, in Manchester, we have power under a local Act, obtained a few years ago, to insist on one room at least having a superficial area of at least 144 square feet. The Local Government Board refused to allow such a provision to be inserted in our bye-laws, and as the matter had become urgent, we had to obtain special power from Parliament to deal with it, as the principal rooms of many cottages were being built 11 feet by 9 feet, or with less than 100 square feet of floor area It is much to be regretted that the Local Government Board will not allow the bye-laws of local authorities to fix a minimum cubic capacity for sleeping rooms—a matter of such importance from the hygienic aspect that a general Parliamentary enactment ought to be called for.

In connection with the revision of our building bye-laws in Manchester, at the present time, I have been able to induce our improvement committee to provide that the height of every room to be used as a sleeping room on the ground or first floor shall be not less in any part thereof than nine feet. This addition to the existing bye-law dealing with the height of rooms became necessary, as it had been interpreted to mean that the rooms on the first floor might be treated as attics, and in that case the height of such rooms need only be nine feet for two-thirds of their area, and the rest of the ceiling could be sloped down to a height of five feet above the floor.

The lack of power to determine the minimum cubic capacity of rooms is the more striking from the fact that there is an Act of Parliament dealing with the housing of four-footed animals, which prescribes a minimum cubic capacity for each cow in its byre. Surely it is more important to provide similar safeguards for almost equally helpless human beings.

Another bye-law I have induced our improvement committee to accept is of a more drastic and far-reaching kind, with regard to open space around dwelling-houses; it is as follows:—"Every person who shall erect a new dwelling-house shall provide open spaces about such dwelling-house which, including the site of such dwelling-house and one-half in width of the adjoining streets co-extensive with such dwelling-house, shall be of an aggregate area of not less than 200 superficial square yards." The existing building bye-laws only provide for the width of streets, 12 yards, for the minimum distance from the back wall of dwelling-house to the boundary of the land or back street at that point, and for the area of open space behind the house, which may not be less than 150 superficial square feet. Under these bye-laws, as many as 51 cottages can be, and are being, built on an acre of land; this is equal to a population of 255 persons per acre—a disgraceful condition of overcrowding. Add to this the use of

material and labour not always of the best, and you will see how we are creating slums in our suburbs that, in the course of a generation, will be as harmful in their hygienic and moral effects as those in the centre of the city are. The suggested novel bye-law (for it has not yet been adopted by any local authority, and it has yet to be accepted by the Local Government Board) will limit the number of houses per acre to 24, and the population to 120. Even this is a much higher number than we might allow if our system of land tenure was altered to enable us to purchase land at a cheaper rate and under less onerous conditions, but when this new bye-law receives official sanction, as it surely will, local authorities all over the kingdom will have power to stop the terrible overcrowding going on in suburban districts.

Sir Benjamin Richardson laid it down that to obtain the lowest death-rate, 8 per 1,000 (half the general average death-rate for the whole country), not more than twenty-five persons should be housed per acre, and this has been proved to be an accurate forecast from the experience of Cadbury's model village at Bournville, where the number of houses varies from six to eight per acre, with a population of thirty or forty persons, and the actual death-rate is under 9 per 1,000.

In fact, it is well known to those who have studied the question that the death-rate varies in different parts of the same town nearly in proportion to the density of the population. In Ancoats, one of the thickly-populated parts of Manchester, the death-rate averages 26 per 1,000, whereas in Cheetham Hill, a residential suburb of the same city for people who can afford houses built under better conditions, the death-rate is only one-half, about 13 per 1,000.

The same result obtains in cities so widely different as London, York, and Oxford.

Recognising that overcrowding is one of the chief factors in producing a high death-rate, a remarkable

illustration of which I have recently found in the case of tenement dwellings, erected by the Corporation of Manchester, only completed about twelve years ago, and, presumably, in a sanitary condition, but the density of the population in these tenements is so great, equal to 278 persons per acre, that the death-rate is 29 per 1,000, 5 per 1,000 higher than in the district of Ancoats, where the tenements are situated, a district covered with old houses in narrow streets, while the death-rate for the whole city of Manchester is only 22 per 1,000. This example of the evil effects of overcrowding indicates that it is our urgent duty, as co-operators and citizens, to use our influence in the locality where our work is carried on, to insist on the building bye-laws being of such a stringent character that in no case shall a greater number than 24 houses be built on an acre of land, and that the rooms of the houses shall be ample in floor space and cubic capacity, so that the poorest householder may have sufficient space in and around his dwelling to get the full advantage of air and sunlight, two of the first essentials of life, so that we may produce full men and women, profit of the best kind, that described by Ruskin, "There is no wealth but life"

The physical deterioration so apparent in towns as compared with the country districts has more to do with deficient light—deficient sun's rays—and impurities in the air than with deficient food. As plants and flowers cannot thrive without abundance of light, sun, and air, neither can human beings. They may exist as sickly, degenerate beings, but not thrive. So that if the authorities are really desirous of doing something in the matter of physical deterioration, then that of limiting overcrowding of area as well as of houses would be a good step in the right direction. Further, the scare of the declining birth-rate can only be combatted by lessening the infantile mortality, and the death-rate amongst children generally. The principal causes of death amongst children are chest diseases—more deaths than from any other disease whatever—and the prime cause is close, stuffy rooms, six, seven,

and eight in one living room not large enough for one person to live in under healthy conditions, the wonder is not that so many die, but that so many survive the unholy conditions. What is the good of calling out for more babies to come into the world, and then to slaughter them as fast as they come?

Further, the terrible number of deaths from bronchitis and pneumonia has much to do with the same cause—impure air, over-crowding of area, overcrowding of houses. In the Candahar expedition under Lord Roberts that was illustrated, in the depth of a terrible winter, in an epidemic of pneumonia which threatened to annihilate his army. Immediately the soldiers were taken out of the huts and put into tents the epidemic ceased.

The present-day treatment of consumption also emphasises it. In other words, if the people do not desire to die as fast as at present from such diseases, then the only plan is the one advocated—fewer houses per acre, larger rooms per family—which means more air, more light, and more sunshine.

In the last annual report of Dr. A. W. Martin, Medical Officer of Health for Gorton, he attributes the decline in the mortality of scarlet fever entirely to lessened crowding of the schools, due to the School Board Act of 1870 and 1872, also the disappearance of jail fever to the same cause.

Dr. Martin states that a little more that one-half of the population of Leeds live in back-to-back houses, but 72 per cent of the infectious cases occur in them, according to figures he obtained a few years ago.

The bye-laws of a local authority control not only the important points I have referred to, but the width of streets, sanitary arrangements, quality and strength of plumbers' work, and the whole of the other material used in the construction of a house, and these bye-laws must be approved by the Local Government Board before they can be put into force.

I have only time to dispose of one objection—the only real objection, in fact—to the adoption of a minimum area of 200 yards of land per house, viz.: that it will increase the rent of a working man's house. It will do nothing of the kind, for the working man is already charged too much in rent for the land on which his house is built, at present. The landlord gets too high a price for the land he sells for house-building, because he has done nothing to bring about the increased value (due to the spread of industry and population) from an agricultural rental of, say, £2 10s per acre to £30 per acre for housing purposes. But worse than the landlord is the speculative builder, who exploits the purchaser of houses still more. He builds on land he has bought on a chief rent of 1½d. per yard (£30 per acre), and charges it at the rate of 3d. to 6d. per yard when selling his houses at cost price of material and labour, plus working expenses (making it appear to be a cheap house)—an excellent plan for the builder, but a heavy burden for all time on the house purchaser. The adoption of an increased minimum area of land per house will compel either the original landowner or the builder to be content with less profit than he is now extorting from the people, who are compelled by circumstances to live on their land.

It appears to me that it is the duty of the municipality, not only to frame bye-laws to secure healthy houses for the community, but to build houses of the best kind themselves wherever there is a necessity. This work should be carried out by a special works department, controlled by capable men, so as to secure the very best workmanship and material, as these are essential to the production of good and permanently healthy houses. Judging by experience in other departments of our own Corporation, where large works have been carried out by their own staff, the results have been most satisfactory, not only in fulfilling the above conditions, but in saving of cost of construction, compared with ordinary contract work. A corporation can borrow money at a low rate of interest, 3¼ to 3½ per cent, and should, therefore, be able to let properly built houses at lower rentals than

the ordinary builders, without imposing any burden on the rates.

Next to the municipality, the co-operative movement appears to me to be in the best position to deal in an effective manner with this problem of housing. Nearly nine millions sterling have been lent by co-operative societies for the purchase of or for building houses for their members; but no control, practically, has been exercised by societies to see that the right kind of houses have been built or purchased. Where societies have built houses either for sale to or for occupation by their members, they have generally followed the customary plan of building long rows of cottages, with a painful and monotonous sameness about every house, undistinguishable, in fact, from the speculative builder's rows of houses, in which he crowds as many cottages on the land as the local authority will allow him, often with less than 100 superficial yards per house, looking to the sale of them and the creation of a heavy ground rent to repay him for his enterprise.

Co-operators ought to realise that they have a higher and better work to do than merely lending their members money at 4 per cent. Their great object should be to help in the production of better men and women, by providing the housing conditions necessary for such a result. It appears to me that the best method for societies to deal with housing is to purchase considerable estates, which they could obtain at comparatively low prices, and lay out such land in a way that will secure healthy houses in attractive neighbourhoods, with artistic and pleasant surroundings. The C.W.S. might be a great leader of the movement in this direction, for in connection with the new productive works it is constantly establishing, it ought to purchase land, not only for the extension and multiplication of such works, but for the erection of model houses and model villages for their workpeople—establish garden cities, in fact—a plan I advocated at the quarterly meetings of the C.W.S. fifteen to twenty years ago.

It is not only a duty of the co-operative movement to take part in this work, but from the merely commercial point of view, it wonld pay them to do so. Men and women are much more effective as workers if they are properly housed and fed, and many large American manufacturers have recognised this by doing what I suggest above, not from a philanthropic motive, but from an economic one, knowing, and proving by experience, that they would get a very large return for the provision of proper conditions of life at cost price in better and more work from their employés.

I am glad to see the co-operative system of housing inaugurated by the Tenants Limited is being followed so largely, at Ealing, Garden City, and now in Manchester. Their plan of operation, though on a much smaller scale, is somewhat similar to that adopted in Germany, where municipalities purchase large areas of land and lay out the streets and buildings in a manner conducive to public amenity, convenience, and health—a plan our local authorities ought to be compelled to adopt in this country.

The object of the Manchester Tenants Limited is to promote co-operative ownership of suitable building estates in the suburbs, and the laying out and erection of houses on land acquired in the best interests of the tenant, with an equitable use of the profits between the tenant and the investor. The shares will be £10 each, £5 to be paid on allotment and the balance by easy instalments. Loan capital will also be raised, having a first claim on the assets of the society, receiving 4 per cent interest per annum, the share capital being credited with interest at the rate of 5 per cent per annum. A site of ten acres has been secured in Burnage Lane, situated in a pleasant residential district, with easy access to Manchester. The price of the land is moderate, and will enable the society to build houses with 400 superficial yards of lands to each, without imposing a heavy ground rent on each house.

The main object of the society is to provide substantial and hygienic houses. They will be let at the ordinary rents, and the surplus profits, after paying the rates of interest already mentioned, providing for working expenses, repairs, depreciation, &c., will be divided among the tenants in proportion to the rents paid by them, so that each tenant receives a dividend on his rent; but the profit is credited in shares, not paid in cash. The greater the profit made, the security of the capital invested is increased, and each tenant is encouraged to take care of the property, thus lessening the expense of repairs. He helps to find tenants if houses are empty, and as the share capital of the tenants affords a fund which may be drawn upon for arrears of rent, loss from this cause is entirely avoided.

The system differs from the ordinary building society and the building department of a co-operative society, as the tenant does not make himself liable for the purchase money of the house he is a tenant of, and he can more readily transfer his shares if he has to leave the neighbourhood; whereas it is sometimes difficult for the owner of a house to get a customer for it. The system has the advantage of giving to all the tenants a share of the increased value of land or buildings that may accrue; but it does not go to the shareholders as such, nor to the individual tenants.

The system has been in operation in the London district since 1888, and the anticipations as to its beneficial working by the founders have been fully confirmed by experience. A Co-partnership Tenants Housing Council has recently been formed in London, having for its object the spread of societies similar to the Tenant Co-operators Limited, so as to prevent, as far as possible, the further spread of poor houses and monotonous streets and the overcrowding in our suburban cottages, now proceeding at such a rapid and dangerous rate. Each new society is guided to a large extent by the methods and practice of the pioneer societies, but they can frame their rules to suit local circumstances. Their rapid

growth will bring more health and pleasure into the lives of those who by their industry have increased the wealth of the community to such a large extent but have hitherto had so small a share in it. This new system of housing will, to some extent, at any rate, help in redressing this crying evil.

The Garden City established at Letchworth will doubtless form a great object-lesson on the question of housing, and its development will be made more rapid by the formation of Co-partnership Housing Associations, such as I have briefly described; but it will not be practicable to go on building this type of city indefinitely, unless special powers are granted by Parliament for the acquisition of land on reasonable terms, or constituting such cities complete local authorities.

The difficulty of getting land at a fair price, and in sufficiently large estates, is too great to enable the housing question to be dealt with in such a broad and comprehensive manner. Then there is the further difficulty of local government. Large estates are often under the control of different unions and parish councils. When the First Garden City is completed, it will not be possible to obtain another large tract of land at a sufficiently low price in that particular neighbourhood on which to found another city on similar lines, owing to the increased value of adjacent land that will necessarily follow from the establishment of productive workshops and a comparatively large population in the new city.

The root solution of this problem, then, is that the land of the country should become the property of the nation so that the community as a whole should be enabled to deal in the most effective way with the land, and receive the benefit of the unearned increment, which now goes into the pockets of private individuals. If we are not prepared to adopt this proposal, which has finality in it, then we must fall back on the taxation of land values, insist upon every owner declaring the taxable value of his land, and give the public authorities the right to acquire such land for public purposes at the

value declared by the owner for taxation. I was able to get a resolution passed by our City Council about nine months ago asking the Government to introduce this principle into any Bill they might bring before Parliament dealing with the land question, an evidence of the ripening of public opinion on the necessity of this reform.

I think every municipality ought to be empowered to a fuller extent than the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890 enables them, to purchase large tracts of land in the immediate neighbourhood of their respective areas, on which to lay out houses, with wide streets, ample space around every dwelling for light and air, so as to secure healthy surroundings for those employed in our large towns. But the cost of converting our existing slums in the city into habitable dwellings is altogether beyond our means, until we have other sources of income from which to draw than are at present available.

In fact we have been spending public money in Manchester for years to help the *slum landlord* to make his unhealthy dwellings fit to live in by making him an allowance of £15 for the demolition of every house, or part of a house, necessary to make the adjoining houses habitable, and in that way about £10,000 was handed over every year, until quite recently, to such owners, out of the rates paid by the whole body of citizens. Ever since I became a member of the Sanitary Committee of the Manchester Corporation I have protested against this mis-application of public money, but two years of incessant fighting was necessary before I succeeded in getting the allowance abolished. Some members of the Council were afraid that a stoppage of the payment would reduce the number of insanitary houses dealt with, but during the past year we have dealt with *double the number of houses* as compared with our previous rate of progress, and saved the ratepayers of Manchester upwards of £20,000 in one year, by putting the cost on the shoulders of the owners of slum property.

The private enterprise of the speculative builder, whose main consideration is individual profit, has miserably

failed to deal with the provision of healthy houses; his principal product has been rows of poor, mean, dear houses, congregated together in dense masses, rendering the homes of the people cheerless, monotonous, and bringing into operation conditions that waste an enormous number of lives, especially young lives, to our great loss as a community and a nation. We are producing men and women in our overcrowded areas who are unfit to take their place either in industrial or other pursuits, and it behoves us to face this problem like men, and do our part as co-operators and citizens to find a solution that will do away with the evils from which we are now suffering.

I should have liked to give details of the kind of houses we ought to build, their cost, arrangement, and so on, but I could hardly make these points clear without the use of drawings, so I must take some other opportunity of showing what has been, and can be, done to deal with the housing question in an effective and economical manner.

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